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Attitude Matters: The Inadequacy of Consequentialist Ethical Practice

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In this paper, I argue that consequentialism as a lived practice is inadequate for ethical decision-making on the grounds that its conception of actions and consequences locks out deeply important ethical considerations. First, I review consequentialism's development and detail the logic of its decision procedure. I give examples of consequentialist decision-making in other areas. I then show how its application in relation to others evinces a failure to capture certain important features of ethical action, namely attitude and disposition. Following an analysis of what considering these concepts entails, I explicate why consequentialism cannot admit attitude and disposition into its moral calculus.

I want to examine consequentialism not as a well thought-out philosophical position, but as a tendency in modern thought and ethical decision-making. While not all forms of utilitarianism are necessarily consequentialist, the deeply utilitarian underpinnings of Anglo-American economic and political thought made the diffusion of consequentialist ethics possible. Utilitarianism is rooted in the work of Jeremy Bentham, who holds that choice worthy actions are those that result in the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people¹. Concentration on bringing about the best consequences, at least in the Anglo-American sphere, emerges from utilitarianism's development. Producing good consequences is the central ethical concern for the utilitarian Henry Sidgwick, whom Elizabeth Anscombe pinpoints as the transitional figure between classical utilitarianism and consequentialism.² She argues that his formulation of intention is such that one is responsible for *all* the foreseeable consequences of one's action.³ An agent deciding on an action would then do well to shift her focus from evaluating the kinds of actions she can choose to working out all of their potential consequences, as she is answerable even for those she does not intend. This shift in focus leads to the view that Anscombe attributes to G.E. Moore and subsequent consequentialists, wherein "the right action' is the action which produces the best possible consequences."⁴ What follows, she asserts, is that for someone to "[act] for the best in the particular circumstances," she must evaluate her action "according to [her] judgment of [its] total consequences."⁵ Speak-

¹ James E. Crimmins, "Jeremy Bentham," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, February 01, 2017, accessed January 12, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bentham/>.

² G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (January 1958): 9, accessed January 12, 2018, <http://www.pitt.edu/~mthompson/readings/mmp.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 7

⁵ Ibid. 8

ing in terms of “total consequences” renders consequentialism a calculative ethics in which an agent considering action A at time t enumerates its possible consequences, weighs the worth of each one, and sums the consequences of A for comparison with those of alternative actions B, C, ..., etc.

Consequentialism, as I’ve described it above, requires the agent to conceive of actions and consequences as discrete events, evaluative units that can be compared to one another and summed together. An agent chooses from a number of actions, e.g., “Given this set of constraints, I can do A, B, or C.” She must then generate a list of probabilities, the consequences she thinks likeliest: “Doing A will result in α , which is a good thing to happen, but β ’s being likely is bad and a reason not to do A; the good consequence of B is γ , but δ would be a bad thing to happen; etc.” A consequence of any action is also forgoing the other actions and their consequences (e.g. “If I do A, I’m not going to do B or bring about γ ”) and the action itself. The total consequences of action A would thus be A itself, α , and β , which the agent can compare to those of actions B and C. Alternatively, the agent can start by asking, “How do I bring about α , given that α would be a good thing to happen?” and answer with a list of possible actions that are reasonably likely to cause α , working out the other consequences as well. Part of what makes this calculative form of ethics so tempting is its linear approach to decision-making. The agent neatly orders events in a sequence with a clear beginning (the action) and ending (the consequences), making it seem simple and straightforward to trace outcomes back to a particular action. Consequentialist calculation also lends itself well to quantitative analysis, even at a layperson’s level where roughly estimating results must suffice in place of more sophisticated calculus, giving one the sense that an action’s success or failure is measurable.

Given its tidy appearance, the spread of consequentialism is unsurprising. Its diffusion is evident in a number of areas. Cost-benefit analysis is used in most large-scale enterprises such as business, healthcare, and government, and in its weighing of outcomes just *is* consequentialist. A consequentialist framework is also the starting point for expected utility decision theory, wherein the rational agent acting under uncertainty “should prefer the option with greatest *expected* desirability or value.”⁶ The individual is essentially choosing according to the best overall consequences she expects, the criteria for “best” being most desirable or valuable to her given the circumstances. A more concrete example of consequentialism appears in the PLUS Ethi-

⁶ Katie Steele and H. Orri Stefánsson, “Decision Theory,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, December 16, 2015, , accessed January 5, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/decision-theory/#VNMRepThe>.

cal Decision Making Model widely taught in ethics and compliance education programs and used in compliance training for a variety of fields. In the seven-step model, the consequentialist framework is made explicit in the third and fourth steps, “Identify available alternative solutions” and “Evaluate the identified alternatives.”⁷ The third step entails the agent considering at least three, ideally five or more, alternative actions for dealing with the problem at hand, and the fourth step involves evaluating the “positive and negative consequence” of each choice and the likelihood of those consequences.⁸ In her decision-making, the agent also considers organization policy and principles, laws and regulations, and her “personal definition of right, good and fair.”⁹ What these models and the consequentialist approach in general leave out is consideration of the attitude with which someone approaches a problem. Attitudes form part of a person’s disposition, the orientation of her thoughts and feelings, which gives her actions qualities that can affect their outcomes. The ways in which action can be described reveal the importance of both attitude and disposition in acting well, and brings into question whether or not consequentialism admits enough ethical content into its calculus to be viable as a lived practice.

Whatever the content of her action, an agent has in mind a particular description under which she intends it. But, as Anscombe observes, “[A] single action can have many different descriptions,” and the agent “may know that [she] is doing a thing under one description, and not under another.”¹⁰ Witnesses to an action can give descriptions that conflict with an agent’s intention in acting. A mother, for example, may intend to do what she judges is beneficial for her child and choose actions that she believes will result in the best possible outcomes; yet, she may find herself in a constant dispute with the child about her actions. The mother may describe what she’s doing with her two daughters after school as follows: “I am helping them with their homework so they’ll get higher marks in class.” Her intention is to help her girls bring up their grades, but one of her daughters describes the action, “You are doing my homework for me”; “You are making me look stupid in front of my sister”; “You are playing favorites again.” These are not descriptions under which the mother intended her action. Nonetheless, they are all true, given the personal history between mother and daughter that underlies the action. The mother’s failure to act well lies

⁷ “The PLUS Ethical Decision Making Model,” Ethics & Compliance Initiative, , accessed January 5, 2018, <http://www.ethics.org/resources/free-toolkit/decision-making-model>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 11.

in the details that never occur to her and that her alienated daughter cannot fail to notice: the tone of her voice or the tiniest change in her expression, the slight inconsistencies in how she treats the two sisters—all the sort of thing that betray her even as she tells them, and really believes, that she has no favorites and is just trying to act for the best. For her daughter the contrary evidence appears not in *what* she does, but the *way in which* she does it. The child's descriptions of her action indicate that her mother takes a certain attitude toward her, perhaps one of exasperation at her inability to keep pace with her sister. This attitude taken over the history of their relationship reinforces the mother's extant disposition for thoughtlessness. The impact of her attitude toward her daughter and the disposition that she has cultivated over a lifetime never enter the mother's consideration of her action's performance. Her attention is on the future state of affairs that she aims to bring about: higher grades indicate academic success, which in the long run increases university options and improves future job prospects. In all her calculation, however, the mother never considers the qualitative aspect of her action. By aiming at good consequences, she leaves out morally salient details of interacting with her daughter. Though she intends to help her child, she succeeds more in hurting her.

One might protest that a mother-child relationship is very emotionally charged, and a consequentialist procedure calls for some objectivity in judgment. Let us look at a more straightforward decision. Two nurses caring for the same elderly patient can separately conclude that of the available options to treat this patient's high heart rate, administering Drug X is the most likely to succeed with the fewest side effects. The nurses are to ensure that the patient takes his medicine daily in order to keep his heart rate down. When asked, "What are you doing?" they can both answer either, "Administering Drug X" or, "Bringing down my patient's heart rate." But one nurse finds that when she administers the drug, his heart rate stays about the same. She is baffled, as her colleague successfully treated the problem the day before. The failure in lowering her patient's heart rate is therefore not precisely traceable to the administering of the drug. The source of failure lies elsewhere. Had anyone thought to ask the patient, "What is she doing?" while this nurse administered Drug X, he would have described the action thus: "She's snapping at me to take my medicine, and she's making me nervous." In this case, too, the failure is in the action's performance. The nurse's curt instruction is symptomatic of an attitude she holds generally. Whenever she habitually engages in e.g. complaining about having to answer the same question repeatedly from one patient, she consents to hold this impatient attitude. She may not have been impatient before becoming a nurse, but over time the attitude gets cultivated into her disposition such that she becomes characteristically impatient.

An objection may be raised here: couldn't an agent, tracing bad outcomes to the performance of her action, adjust her behavior to elicit better ones? If the nurse can recognize that her poor performance was a consequence of complaining about her patients, the nurse can simply choose different actions. She can make a point of praising her patients to colleagues or keep silent altogether. Choosing one of these actions where she once would have complained will result in a better performance when interacting with patients that annoy her. The outcomes of her actions will then be more likely to bear out her intentions.

But this linear approach leaves the connection between the nurse's habit and the interaction between her and the patient unclear. Her choice not to express her negative thoughts and feelings, perhaps even going so far as to conceal them beneath a complimentary veneer, deals only with superficial behavior outside of the nurse's relationship to her patient. The psychological structures underlying her poor performance with the patient are thus left intact. How she relates to certain patients is not a consequence of discrete actions chosen over a period of time, but the product of thinking and feeling a certain way about them. Correcting behavior with the intention of bringing about good consequences is insufficient for acting well in relation to others. What is needed to act well in one's relationships are qualities beyond the ability to reason out an action's possible consequences. The cultivation of beneficial qualities in a disposition demands a long-term commitment. We must have the will to act according to virtue.

Virtue, Philippa Foot argues, belongs to the will.¹¹ But there is more to willing than just intending. The above examples of the mother and nurse fall under what Foot calls "the interesting class of cases" among those in which the failure is in the action's performance, but "there is no possibility of shifting the judgement to previous intentions."¹² Though the mother and the nurse chose their actions with the intention of helping their charges, they showed qualities, namely, insensitivity and impatience, that people generally find distasteful. Foot attributes the failure to "the disposition of the heart," stating that a person "sometimes [...] succeeds where another fails not because there is some specific difference in their previous conduct but rather because his heart lies in a different place."¹³ All the details of someone's performance reveal

¹¹ Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

the orientation of her “innermost desires,” i.e. her attitude, which indicates the quality of her disposition.¹⁴ In the mother’s and nurse’s cases, they can say truthfully that they mean to help, but fail in that their attitudes do not cohere with their intentions. Coherence in aim and desire appears in Foot’s example of generosity: she observes that we usually discern whether or not someone is genuinely generous by her delight “in the good fortune of others.”¹⁵ A person may aim at a good outcome when she engages in giving, but we would not call her generous if she begrudges the cost of her action. Foot notes that these “small reactions of pleasure and displeasure [are] often the surest signs of [one’s] moral disposition.”¹⁶ The will, in the sense of both aiming and desiring, to act well captures the minutiae of an action to which others react. A person’s will extends beyond any discrete event, encompassing her short-term intentions but remaining even after they cease. The will runs through her life, permeating all of her interactions and every decision she is called upon to make.

Because the process for choosing her actions only deals with discrete events, the consequentialist cannot admit “will” in the above sense into her moral vocabulary, nor can she have any rich discussion of disposition and its qualities. She is unable to describe an action as, e.g., courageous or generous because she ties the moral worth of her actions to their consequences, and one cannot describe a consequence as being courageous or generous. The most the agent can say is that it was good, beneficial, or desirable. But what does this really mean? Peter Geach contends that “good” is not an adjective like “red” or “sweet” that can stand apart from the object it describes.¹⁷ Though defining a “good human action” presents its own difficulties, one can say a courageous act was good if one takes courage as a quality essential to living well. We can make sense of good actions in light of Foot’s conception of will as both aim and desire: Geach points out that “an action’s being a good or bad human action is of itself something that touches the agent’s desires.”¹⁸ But an A’s being called good or bad does not affect our desires unless an A is what’s at stake for us. We would not choose, for example, a bad knife over a good one, since we want knives that are suitable for the purpose of cutting foods. A bad knife cannot do the same job as a good knife, and it would affect our choice in a department store if we overheard

¹⁴ Ibid. 5

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ P.T. Geach, “‘Good and Evil’” *Analysis* 17, no. 2 (1956): 33, accessed January 12, 2018, doi:10.2307/3326442.

¹⁸ Ibid. 40

someone calling a knife for sale bad. We choose our actions and, according to Geach, our “manner of acting” or the way in which we perform our actions.¹⁹ For someone desiring to act well, calling an action or the way in which it is performed “good” influences her choice if she is deliberating what to do and how to do it. Since desire is part of the will, applying the terms good and bad to an action also touches on our commitment to developing a good disposition.

Consequences, however, cannot simply be called good or bad. A consequence is a happening, not specific to moral actions. The only difference between it and the word “event” is that a consequence occurs after an action, whereas we can use “event” in reference to occurrences unrelated to human choices. Like “thing,” “event” and “consequence” are empty words that stand in for actual content. So, on Geach’s view, asking whether a consequence is good or bad would be pointless unless “consequence” was specified by a context.²⁰ To use his example, one cannot sensibly say that killing Caesar had a bad consequence. The emptiness of “consequence” must be filled with some content: “Caesar’s murder was a bad thing to happen to a living organism, a good fate for a man who wanted divine worship for himself, and again a good or bad act on the part of his murderers.”²¹ The same applies for beneficial and desirable consequences; for we can ask, “Beneficial for whom? Desirable in virtue of what?” No future state of affairs can be called good in and of itself. It is therefore incoherent to say that one should choose an action according to the best possible consequences. This confusion makes consequentialism inadequate as a lived practice. Moreover, without a way to discuss and adequately correct attitude and disposition, the consequentialist is left with little ethical content by which to judge her actions.

On paper, the consequentialist procedure appears orderly. As a lived practice, however, it leads to much confusion about what is ethically important not only for making a single decision, but also for acting well generally. Yet, the appeal of continuing to make ethical decisions in this way lies precisely in consequentialism’s inability to deeply consider attitude and disposition. Focusing on bringing about a certain outcome is much less unnerving than focusing on one’s character defects and having a will to continually correct them. Aiming to become a different kind of person takes a great deal of interior work and honesty with oneself, something the consequentialist procedure does not encourage. Consequentialism’s diffusion into the wider culture is

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. 40-41

²¹ Ibid. 41

worrisome in that it enables a lack of self-awareness, which alienates a person from others even as she tries to do what she believes is good for them.

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